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Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian and disaster relief assistance of the United Nations, including special economic assistance: strengthening of the coordination of emergency humanitarian assistance of the United Nations

International cooperation on humanitarian assistance in the field of natural disasters, from relief to development

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report has been prepared pursuant to General Assembly resolution 62/92, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to continue to improve the international response to natural disasters and to report thereon to the General Assembly at its sixty-third session. The report provides an overview of the occurrence of disasters associated with natural hazards and the humanitarian response to them and highlights emerging trends, their implications for humanitarian action and the key challenges that need to be addressed.

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I. Introduction

1. The present report has been prepared in response to General Assembly resolution 62/92. It provides an overview of the occurrence of disasters associated with natural hazards and the humanitarian response to them and highlights emerging trends, their implications for humanitarian action and the key challenges that need to be addressed. It concludes with a number of recommendations.

A. Trends and emerging challenges[1]

2. During 2007, 414 disasters associated with natural hazards were recorded, costing more than 16,800 lives and affecting over 211 million people. According to the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters, the total number of disasters in 2007 was the third highest on record and slightly above the 2000-2006 average of 394 disasters per year. The number of victims (those killed and affected) was the second highest this decade and almost twice the level of 2006.

3. These figures conform to a longer-term trend of increasing frequency and intensity of recorded disasters associated with natural hazard events. Over the past two decades, the number of reported disasters has doubled from an average of about 200 to over 400 events per year. This increase can, in part, be attributed to better reporting, but other factors, including changes in both hazard patterns and human vulnerability, also contribute to these trends.

4. The increase in recorded disaster events is particularly pronounced for climate-related hazard events. Floods remained the most frequent type of disaster recorded, with just over 210 incidents recorded in 2007. Together with storms, they accounted for more than 86 per cent of the overall disaster mortality and 98 per cent of the total number of affected persons.

5. The incidence of tropical cyclones was particularly high in 2007, with 64 incidents recorded; an increase of 28 per cent compared with the 2000-2006 average. The number of geophysical disasters, such as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, in 2007 was lower than average, with only 26 geophysical disasters reported (6 per cent of the total events).

6. Asia continued to be the region hardest hit by hazard-related disasters. Indeed, 37 per cent of disasters reported in 2007 occurred in Asia, accounting for 90 per cent of all victims and 46 per cent of all recorded economic damage. For example, particularly severe monsoon flooding throughout Asia affected approximately 170 million people in mid-2007. Cyclone Sidr struck Bangladesh killing over 4,200 people in November 2007. These trends have continued in 2008. In May 2008, over 140,000 people were reported dead or missing in Myanmar as a result of the devastating Cyclone Nargis. Days later, China's Sichuan Province was rocked by a massive earthquake that claimed almost 69,000 lives.

[1] Data in section A are drawn from the International Disaster Database (http://www.em-dat.net) of the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters at the Université Catholique de Louvain, Brussels, and from ReliefWeb (http://www.reliefweb.int) of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs of the Secretariat; for methodological reasons they cover the calendar year 2007. Data in subsequent sections refer to the reporting period 1 June 2007-31 May 2008.

7. Disasters caused more than $74.9 billion in economic damage in 2007, almost 80 per cent of which was caused by climate-related hazard events. Dollar figures alone, however, do not accurately capture the impact of disasters. The 65 disasters in Europe in 2007 accounted for 27 per cent of the world's economic damage from hazard-related disasters, but only 1 per cent of the world's victims. Conversely, in poorer communities, although absolute financial losses are lower, a disaster's impact on lives and livelihoods is often far more devastating. Within communities, women, children and already marginalized groups are often affected disproportionately.

8. The toll of the human costs of disasters remained concentrated in a small number of larger events and higher risk countries. The 10 most significant disasters accounted for 55 per cent of all the reported deaths and 85 per cent of the total number of people affected. This suggests that although the vast majority of small and medium-scale disasters are responded to locally by national authorities, there is a continued need to strengthen regional and international preparedness and response systems for those large-scale events which may overwhelm local capacity to cope.

9. Global climate change is also increasing the risk of disasters. The recent Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change fourth assessment report made clear that the evidence to confirm human-induced global warming is now unequivocal. The report noted that this will very likely increase the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events such as droughts, cyclones and floods. This will also profoundly affect agricultural production, increasing the number of people at risk of hunger in vulnerable areas. More frequent and intense flooding will also heighten the risk of water-borne diseases. Rising temperatures have already increased the likelihood of malaria epidemics in parts of Africa. Combined, these changes have the potential to intensify the struggle for scarce resources, increasing the potential for displacement, migration and armed conflict.

10. The recent unprecedented increase in food costs also has far-reaching implications for the humanitarian system. Worldwide, global food prices have soared 50 per cent since July 2007, threatening to drive another 100 million people into hunger and poverty. In-kind donations of food aid for humanitarian operations are also decreasing and food procurement constitutes an increasing percentage of overall humanitarian costs. For example, this year's mid-year review of the consolidated appeals process showed a $900 million dollar increase, of which $700 million was for food aid.

11. The implementation of preparedness and early warning systems in numerous countries at high risk of storms and floods, like Bangladesh, has already proved its effectiveness in saving human lives. Indeed, despite the overall increase in disaster incidence, the number of reported deaths and affected persons has remained relatively stable over the past 20 years. Improved preparedness and early warning systems have undoubtedly contributed to this trend. The emerging challenges of climate change and greater global food insecurity reinforce the need to strengthen disaster preparedness and risk-reduction efforts as a means of reducing the humanitarian impact of hazard events.

II. Year in review (1 June 2007-31 May 2008)

A. Climate-related hazard events

1. Africa

12. Throughout the summer of 2007, a combination of extremely high temperatures and low rainfall led to one of the worst droughts in Southern Africa in 30 years, affecting Lesotho and Swaziland in particular. Over 400,000 people required humanitarian assistance. Flash appeals were launched for the two countries in July 2008, requesting $22 million and $18 million respectively, to support the provision of food aid, agricultural inputs, early livelihood recovery and other basic services. By the close of the reporting period, both appeals were over 70 per cent funded.

13. Unusually heavy rainfall in the latter part of 2007 also led to some of the worst and most widespread floods in the history of Africa.

14. In West Africa, floods affected over 800,000 people in 15 countries, destroying houses and washing away thousands of hectares of crops. The floods coincided with the so-called "lean season" when families, mostly in the Sahel region, face regular food insecurity. Livelihoods were further endangered by the large loss of livestock. The worst hit countries included Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali and Togo. The United Nations and its partner organizations launched flash appeals in October 2007 for Burkina Faso ($5.9 million) and Ghana ($12 million) to initiate immediate humanitarian aid. To date, the two appeals have been 21 per cent and 59 per cent funded respectively.

15. In Eastern Africa, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia, the Sudan and Uganda were badly hit by floods in August and September 2007. Several hundred thousand people were affected or displaced. The floods also contributed to outbreaks of diseases such as malaria and acute watery diarrhoea. In the Sudan, more than half a million people were affected when the Nile and several seasonal rivers burst their banks. Farms and livestock as well as roads, latrines, hospitals and schools were damaged or swept away, leaving whole communities destitute and food production significantly lower. By the close of the reporting period, a flash appeal had provided $18 million for relief efforts (about 50 per cent of the requested amount). In Uganda, floods affected 300,000 people and damaged 8,500 acres of crops, resulting in widespread food insecurity. Humanitarian actors assisted the Government in providing emergency food aid.

16. Having barely recovered from the floods that hit the region a year earlier, Southern Africa once again faced unusually early and torrential rainfall and three consecutive cyclones in early 2008. Over 1 million people were living without adequate shelter. Madagascar, Malawi and Mozambique were worst affected, but Lesotho, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe were also hit hard. In February 2008, the United Nations and its partners launched the Southern African region flood preparedness and response plan, to support the implementation of national contingency plans for response. An additional flash appeal for Madagascar was launched in February 2008. By the close of the reporting period, the Madagascar Appeal had received 46 per cent of the $46 million requested, while the regional appeal had received $17 million, or 20 per cent of the requested $89 million.

2. Asia

17. Over the summer of 2007, South Asia experienced the worst floods in over a decade. Just as the monsoon was expected to be coming to an end, heavy rains and subsequent floods swept across Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan in September. The rains stranded over 100,000 people in Bangladesh and left millions homeless in India. Overall, the floods killed more than 4,000 people and disrupted the lives of more than 66 million. A flash appeal requested $42 million to support relief efforts in Pakistan, of which approximately 50 per cent has been funded to date.

18. In August 2007, torrential rains caused severe flooding in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, killing over 450 and affecting almost 1 million people. Over 240,000 homes were damaged or destroyed and key transport and communications infrastructure, medical services and power supplies suffered major damage. There was significant damage to crops, adding to ongoing concerns regarding food insecurity. A flash appeal was launched, through which $13 million (90 per cent of the requested amount) was provided to support humanitarian assistance.

19. Heavy rains in early August 2007 caused serious flooding in central Viet Nam. The affected areas were still recovering when Typhoon Lekima made landfall on 3 October. Authorities managed to evacuate 400,000 people and thus limited the loss of lives to 88. Overall, two million people were affected by the typhoon and associated flooding.

20. In November a major cyclone, Sidr, hit Bangladesh causing extensive damage, especially in the country's south-western districts. Due to investments in preparedness and risk reduction, the Government was able to evacuate more than three million people to safety at short notice. Nationally led efforts provided relief and recovery assistance from the outset, supplemented where necessary by international humanitarian actors. Overall, 4,200 people lost their lives, 55,000 were reported injured and more than 8.9 million people were affected. Material damage was severe, with over 560,000 homes and over 4,000 schools completely destroyed. There was no international appeal as such, but humanitarian assistance came from many quarters.

21. Abnormally cold weather and heavy snowfall in December 2007 in Tajikistan, combined with two consecutive poor harvests and a drastic increase in food and fuel prices, left rural populations with few remaining strategies to cope. A flash appeal was launched in February 2008, seeking $26 million to address the needs of two million people and to undertake preparedness measures for potential flooding in the spring when the snow melts. To date, the appeal is just over 50 per cent funded.

22. The harshest winter weather conditions in nearly 30 years in Afghanistan caused fatalities, hardship and major access problems in the western and central highlands in the beginning of 2008. Almost 900 people died and agricultural production was severely damaged. Internally displaced persons living in camps near Herat, Afghanistan, were particularly affected. National and international humanitarian organizations assisted the Afghan authorities in providing food, shelter material and other basic assistance to the affected areas. The harsh winter was then followed by months of below normal rainfall in much of central Afghanistan, which further limited domestic food production in a period of globally spiralling food

prices. In response to these events a $81 million Afghanistan joint appeal to address the humanitarian consequences of the rise in food prices was launched in January 2008 to provide a safety net for the 425,000 most vulnerable households placed at risk of food insecurity. A further joint appeal for just over $400 million was launched at the end of June 2008.

23. Cyclone Nargis struck Myanmar on 2 May 2008, sweeping through the Ayeyarwady Delta region and Yangon Division. Approximately 2.4 million people were severely affected and official figures put the number of dead and missing at nearly 40,000. Damage was particularly severe in the delta region, where the effects of extreme winds were compounded by a huge storm surge that destroyed large numbers of dwellings, crops, planting fields, fisheries and livestock. Infrastructure, including roads and telecommunication lines, was also severely damaged. A United Nations disaster assessment and coordination team was immediately dispatched and a flash appeal was launched for $201 million to assist the Government-led relief work. By the close of the reporting period, a new revised appeal, totalling some $482 million, had been 40 per cent funded. In the first weeks, because of Government limitations on access for international aid workers and assets, the level and timeliness of aid getting into the country were inadequate. Following missions to the country in late May by the Secretary-General and by the Emergency Relief Coordinator and an international pledging conference in Yangon, access significantly improved and proper relief and assessment efforts have been able to unfold.

3. Latin America and the Caribbean

24. 2007 was the first year on record that two Atlantic hurricanes (Dean and Felix) made landfall at maximum strength in the same season. Hurricane Dean entered the eastern Caribbean in mid-August, killing at least 26 people and causing widespread material damage and loss of crops, in Belize, Haiti, Jamaica and Mexico. Hurricane Felix hit Nicaragua at the beginning of September, affecting a further 162,000 people and destroying 8,000 houses, as well as many communications and power lines. The widespread destruction of bridges and roads hampered the relief operations. A flash appeal asking for $41 million to support relief efforts was launched immediately after the event. By the end of the reporting period, the appeal was 43 per cent funded.

25. In October and December 2007, the Dominican Republic was hit by two intense tropical storms, which brought heavy rains and flooding and severely damaged economic and social infrastructure. The storms killed over 160 people and directly affected more than 130,000 people.

26. In October 2007, heavy rains in Mexico caused the worst flooding in more than 50 years. Over a million people in the states of Tabasco and Chiapas were affected. Crops were destroyed, livestock killed and most businesses in the states were affected. In addition, the rains caused landslides which damaged the road network, hampering relief efforts. At least 11 hospitals and more than 100 medical centres were partially or totally flooded. United Nations organizations and other international humanitarian actors supported the Government of Mexico in relief and rehabilitation efforts.

27. Persistent rains that were heavier than normal during the first months of 2008 triggered flooding across parts of northern and central South America. More than

339,000 persons were affected and 50 people lost their lives. Displaced people sheltering in urban camps were among the most vulnerable. An estimated 70,000 hectares of food and cash crops were also destroyed. A flash appeal to support humanitarian relief operations in Bolivia was launched in February asking for $18 million, of which 73 per cent has been funded to date.

B. Geological hazard events

28. An earthquake measuring 7.9 on the Richter scale struck the coast of Peru on 15 August 2007, destroying many buildings, including hospitals and schools, in the city of Pisco and seriously affecting many other areas, including the capital, Lima. More than 500 people died as a direct consequence of the quake. A flash appeal was launched for $37 million to assist more than 200,000 people requiring life-saving assistance. By the close of the reporting period, the appeal was almost 60 per cent funded.

29. On 12 May 2008, a major earthquake measuring 8.0 on the Richter scale struck Wenchuan County in the Sichuan Province of China. This was followed by a number of major aftershocks, many of which measured over 5.0 on the Richter scale. Almost 69,000 people were killed and approximately 374,000 people were injured. By the close of the reporting period approximately 18,000 people were still missing. Almost 5.5 million homes were destroyed and an additional 5.9 million houses were seriously damaged. In Sichuan, as in earlier large-scale earthquakes, collapsed buildings caused the largest number of fatalities. A massive nationally led rescue and relief operation was initiated, resulting in the evacuation of 15 million people from the affected area. A total of 45 million people are estimated to have been affected by the earthquakes. The Government of China welcomed assistance from the international community, which to date has committed over $250 million dollars in cash and in-kind contributions.

C. Epidemics

30. Poor access to health services is of immediate concern in many countries vulnerable to natural hazards, since health infrastructure is often overwhelmed and transport links are damaged after disasters. Water and sanitation services are often interrupted, putting populations at risk from outbreaks of water- and food-borne diseases, such as cholera. Overcrowding and displacement also increase the risk of transmission of measles, meningitis and acute respiratory infections. Moreover, flooding increases the medium-term risk of malaria, dengue fever and other diseases. International aspects of communicable disease outbreaks are now managed under the International Health Regulations (2005), a legally binding agreement among 194 States, which came into force in June 2007. During the reporting period, the United Nations verified 162 infectious disease outbreaks globally, affecting 75 countries. Of these, 37 per cent occurred in Africa. Major epidemics included cholera and other epidemic diarrhoeal diseases, measles and haemorrhagic fevers.

31. Disasters interact with the HIV/AIDS epidemic to undermine the health and livelihoods of AIDS-affected populations, while increasing the conditions, such as sexual violence, malnutrition and population displacement, that are likely to intensify the HIV/AIDS burden. A number of the reporting period's major disasters,

such as the droughts in Lesotho and Swaziland and the floods in Southern Africa occurred in countries with an HIV prevalence as high as 30 per cent of the population. These disasters further exacerbate the already vulnerable AIDS-affected populations by decreasing their access to food, livelihoods, shelter and medical services.

32. The United Nations system is also continuing efforts to prepare for a potential influenza pandemic. The avian influenza H5N1 virus is now endemically circulating in poultry in at least five countries. Human cases and deaths from avian influenza H5N1 have been reported in 15 countries since 2003 and have caused more than 100 human deaths in Indonesia alone. Experts agree that a high mortality influenza pandemic is as serious a threat to human security now as it was two years ago. In December 2007, donors pledged $406 million for efforts to control avian influenza and to prepare for a possible pandemic. The United Nations and its partners continued to support country level contingency planning and to assist Governments in preparing for and addressing emerging humanitarian needs related to a possible pandemic.

III. Key challenges

33. Over the past two decades, while the number of recorded disasters has increased significantly, so too has disaster resilience in some countries. For example, the approximately 4,200 deaths resulting from Cyclone Sidr in November 2007, though tragic, are significantly lower than the over 300,000 deaths attributable to a cyclone of similar magnitude that hit the same area in 1970. The lower death rate is directly attributable to the improved and effective use of early warning and community-based preparedness measures, as well as Government-led efforts to evacuate some 3 million people from the areas expected to be hit by the cyclone.

34. Strengthened preparedness is essential to saving lives and livelihoods in disasters. Increasing capacity to predict, monitor, warn and respond to the needs of those who have been adversely affected in an emergency is essential for effective humanitarian action. This includes establishing institutional arrangements in advance and maintaining effective early warning, information management and contingency planning systems. Stockpiling equipment and supplies, strengthening emergency services and standby arrangements, allocating sufficient resources and funding, establishing communications and coordination arrangements and providing training and public education are also important. Regional and international cooperation can be essential in further strengthening these systems.

35. Effective disaster preparedness is a critical component of a holistic disaster risk reduction approach, as outlined in the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015: Building the Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disasters, which was adopted by 168 States at the World Conference on Disaster Reduction in Kobe, Hyogo, Japan, in 2005. The Framework for Action provides a road map for achieving a substantial reduction in disaster losses by 2015 and aims to protect not only lives but also social, economic and environmental assets. Within this framework, the strategic goals of the Framework for Action include the integration of disaster risk reduction into sustainable development policies and planning, the development and strengthening of institutions, mechanisms and capacities to build

resilience to hazards and the systematic incorporation of risk reduction approaches into the implementation of emergency preparedness, response and recovery programmes. While a number of priority areas in the Framework for Action are essentially developmental in nature, two of its five priority areas emphasize the need for enhanced early warning systems and preparedness for effective response, which are both central components of humanitarian action.

A. Strengthening disaster preparedness for effective response

36. During the reporting period, a number of key steps were taken at the global level to strengthen early warning and preparedness for response capacity. The start of the reporting period coincided with the first session of the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction organized by the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction secretariat. The meeting brought together representatives of 124 Member States and over 1,200 participants from Governments, United Nations organizations, financial and academic institutions, non-governmental organizations and civil society, to assess and support implementation of the Hyogo Framework for Action. It also provided an invaluable forum for stakeholders from all levels and priority areas of the Framework to strengthen linkages and learn from established best practice. In addition to a wide range of implementation activities, preparations for the second session of the Global Platform, scheduled for June 2009, are well under way.

37. Ongoing humanitarian reform efforts have been used to foster greater coherence among international humanitarian actors and greater synergy with national response mechanisms. Investment in the global "cluster" coordination system has ensured improved collaboration on preparedness in a number of countries, as well as better and quicker support from the global level at the outset of several disasters. In the reporting period, the cluster approach was used in a number of disaster responses, including for Bangladesh, Bolivia, Mozambique, Myanmar, Pakistan, Tajikistan and parts of West Africa.

38. Following an extensive review process in November 2007, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee endorsed the revised Inter-Agency Contingency Planning Guidelines for Humanitarian Assistance. These Guidelines present recommendations on how to establish and implement an inter-agency contingency planning process, develop integrated plans and monitor ongoing preparedness actions. The Guidelines also outline how the international humanitarian community can organize itself to support and complement national action. The Guidelines have been widely disseminated throughout the humanitarian community and inter-agency contingency planning has featured prominently in United Nations training and orientation programmes. An inter-agency contingency planning online toolbox was finalized and disseminated in July 2008. Simulation exercises are also increasingly being used to test planning assumptions and response systems. For example, in early 2008 simulations helped the humanitarian country teams in Guinea-Bissau and Mauritania to develop their contingency plans.

39. Humanitarian agencies, at the request of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, also finalized the guidance and indicator package for implementing priority five (disaster preparedness for effective response) of the Hyogo Framework for Action. The guidance supports Member States, civil society, regional

organizations and international actors to strengthen their preparedness capacity. The tool has already been introduced by United Nations organizations to relevant Government counterparts in both Nepal and Uganda as a means of strengthening analysis, dialogue and planning. Further application of the tool in other regions is scheduled for 2008. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies is also currently leading an inter-agency initiative to develop a complementary guidance note on humanitarian action that takes into account disaster risk as part of action on these issues by the Inter-Agency Committee.

40. Enhancing partnerships between humanitarian organizations to improve humanitarian action was the focus of the second meeting of the Global Humanitarian Platform, held on 1 and 2 July 2008. The United Nations, various international and non-governmental organizations and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement participated in the meeting. Participants agreed that the Platform should be a forum for strategic discussion and analysis, focusing on key issues such as increased engagement of national non-governmental organizations in strategic and policy discussions and support to local non-governmental organizations, Governments and civil society to ensure better preparedness and therefore better response to humanitarian crises. The meeting also endorsed the Platform's key principles of partnership: equality, transparency, a results-oriented approach, responsibility and complementarity. These will guide the ongoing activities of the Platform and those of its members.

1. Strengthening the international legal framework for disaster risk reduction and the protection of persons affected by disasters associated with natural hazards

41. Adequate legal and institutional frameworks are an essential enabling factor for sustainable preparedness systems. In November 2007, the Guidelines for the Domestic Facilitation and Regulation of International Disaster Relief and Initial Recovery Assistance were unanimously adopted at the thirtieth International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent. These Guidelines are the product of two years of broad-based consultations led by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, involving over 140 States and national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies, as well as numerous United Nations intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations. The Guidelines provide a compilation of existing international norms and are designed to assist Governments in preparing their legal and institutional arrangements for international disaster assistance.

42. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, in collaboration with the United Nations system and other partners, has now started to promote incorporation of the Guidelines into legal development, disaster management and risk reduction initiatives. For example, in Indonesia, following the adoption of legislation on disaster management in March 2007, humanitarian actors formed a task force to contribute to the drafting by the Government of the necessary supplementary regulations related to the role of international institutions and international non-governmental organizations in disaster management. Implementation of the Guidelines was also highlighted in the recommendations of the United Nations disaster assessment and coordination preparedness mission to Bhutan in 2008 and the provision of further technical assistance to other interested Governments is planned. Continued corporation between the Federation and the United Nations system in promoting the use of the Guidelines and bringing them into the mainstream is important.

43. Persons affected by disasters may suffer increased vulnerability and violation of their human rights as a result of inadequate planning and disaster preparedness and inappropriate policies or neglect in the disaster response. Women, children and already marginalized groups are often among those most at risk. In June 2006, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee adopted the Operational Guidelines on Human Rights and Natural Disasters. These Guidelines and an accompanying manual provide guidance on how to protect the rights of individuals affected by disasters through implementation of a humanitarian response based on human rights. A first series of regional workshops to disseminate and promote the Guidelines took place in Central America in May 2008. Others are now planned for Africa and Asia within the framework of the Protection Cluster Working Group.

44. In addition, the International Law Commission includes the topic of "Protection of persons in the event of disasters" in its work programme and has appointed a Special Rapporteur on the issue. A preliminary report of the Special Rapporteur (A/CN.4/598) and a study prepared by the Commission's secretariat (A/CN.4/598 and Add.1 and 2) formed the basis of the Commission's consideration of the issue at its sixtieth session, in 2008.

2. Strengthening national, local and regional capacities

45. During the reporting period, both the United Nations disaster assessment and coordination system and the International Search and Rescue Advisory Group continued to work with Member States to enhance preparedness and response capacity. During the reporting period, 13 United Nations disaster assessment and coordination response missions were deployed, eight to the Americas and Caribbean region, two to Africa and three to Asia. The missions were deployed to assess the impact of six floods, five storms and two earthquakes and to coordinate responses to them. A United Nations disaster assessment and coordination response preparedness mission was also sent to Bhutan where, at the request of the Government, it supported an evaluation of the national emergency preparedness plan and helped to identify ways to improve existing systems.

46. United Nations disaster assessment and coordination induction courses and refresher training sessions were also conducted for Africa and Europe, for the Americas and for the Asia and Pacific regions. Disaster managers trained in United Nations disaster assessment and coordination, 40 per cent of whom are from developing countries, joined a network of disaster experts that can be called upon for advice and assistance in response preparedness, training and capacity-building activities.

47. The International Search and Rescue Advisory Group network links over 90 per cent of the world's international urban search and rescue teams through regional groups, specialized working groups and international earthquake response exercises and other specialized activities. The Advisory Group coordination methodology was applied by urban search and rescue teams in all earthquake response operations in the reporting period. The Advisory Group also formally evaluated and classified four international urban search and rescue teams from Germany, the Netherlands, Singapore and the United States of America, in addition to one international non-governmental organization team, during the reporting period.

48. To further support the development of national disaster capacity in higher risk settings, in mid-2007 the United Nations also launched the Capacity for Disaster Reduction Initiative as an inter-agency initiative to support the implementation of the Hyogo Framework for Action. To date, support has been provided under the Initiative for the completion of a disaster risk reduction course for the Swedish Rescue Services Agency; delivered a workshop on organizational network analysis in collaboration with a training and learning circle in Asia; completed a capacity assessment exercise with the humanitarian country team in the Philippines; and assisted the development of a disaster preparedness plan for Uganda. In the coming year, various disaster preparedness activities will continue to be supported under the Initiative, including development of a learning package on bringing disaster risk reduction into the mainstream of existing humanitarian and development frameworks.

49. Humanitarian actors also stepped up efforts to promote the sharing of good practices in preparedness for disaster response. For example, in Bangladesh the humanitarian country team and the Government facilitated an inter-agency exercise on lessons learned from the response to Cyclone Sidr. In Honduras, the Government undertook a lessons-learned exercise on preparedness to respond to hurricanes, with the participation of the United Nations and other organizations. In Uganda, the humanitarian country team held a workshop to collect lessons from the response to the floods in 2007 in order to be prepared for the 2008 rainy season. In Pakistan, the National Disaster Management Authority, with the support of the United Nations system, is preparing disaster risk and recovery baseline studies in disaster prone districts and standard operating procedures for post-disaster livelihood assessment at the district level.

B. Harnessing information technology for improved humanitarian action

50. The availability of robust, reliable information and communications systems is critical for effective disaster response and enhances the security of humanitarian workers. Applying the latest technological advances in areas of remote sensing, mapping and satellite imagery has proved invaluable for humanitarian actors.

51. The online Virtual On-Site Operations Coordination Centre is used by over 7,000 disaster managers worldwide to exchange information during emergencies. During a sudden-onset disaster, usage of the Virtual Coordination Centre and new user requests soar, demonstrating its pivotal role in rapid information dissemination and response planning and coordination. The Virtual Coordination Centre is the platform for the Global Disaster Alert and Coordination System, which provides near-real-time disaster alerts with an automated estimation of likely impact. Both of these online tools permit instantaneous sharing of information and coordination for the international humanitarian response community at large.

52. During the reporting period, the emergency telecommunications cluster provided support to the humanitarian community in more than 20 countries. This included the deployment of technical teams to assess and provide emergency telecommunications services during emergencies in Bangladesh, the Central African Republic, Chad, Colombia, Ecuador, Ghana, Mozambique and Peru.

53. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee Sub-Working Group on Emergency Telecommunications, whose membership includes both humanitarian agencies and the private sector, has continued to promote the adoption of emergency telecommunication standards to increase the interoperability of equipment and systems in disaster areas. In 2007, a special meeting of the Sub-Working Group was convened to address issues related to procedures for the management of the radio frequency spectrum for emergency telecommunications in the initial stages of disaster relief operations. This resulted in the adoption of a resolution at the International Telecommunication Union World Radiocommunication Conference in November 2007. The resolution mandated the establishment of a database of currently available frequencies for use in emergency situations and the development of standard operating procedures for spectrum management in disasters. These efforts will support and expedite the initiation of effective communication systems in the early stages after a disaster.

54. Efforts continued to promote the Tampere Convention on the Provision of Telecommunication Resources for Disaster Mitigation and Relief Operations. With the addition of Argentina and Ireland in 2007, 37 States have now ratified the Convention. While emphasizing the rights of national authorities to control their own telecommunications environment, the Tampere Convention suggests mechanisms through which the provision of additional equipment, including life-saving equipment, can be facilitated. Through ratification and implementation of the Convention, regulatory barriers that impede the use of telecommunication resources for disasters are waived. These barriers include the licensing requirements to use allocated frequencies, restrictions on the import of telecommunication equipment and limitations on the movement of humanitarian teams.

55. The use of space-based technology is increasingly enabling the United Nations system to provide real-time satellite maps at no cost to the humanitarian community. During the reporting period, 46 emergency responses, including all emergency United Nations disaster assessment and coordination missions, were supported with over 160 maps derived from satellite imagery, illustrating the situation before the disaster and the initial impact assessment. A review carried out by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee in September 2007 confirmed the benefit of this support, which includes the dissemination of satellite maps via the Virtual On-Site Operations Coordination Centre, the Global Disaster Alert and Coordination System and ReliefWeb, in addition to the web-based means deployed by individual organizations. Satellite imagery was also included among the minimum data requirements to be made available in responding to any emergency. Satellite derived geographic information also provides invaluable information for national authorities as they begin to chart the transition from humanitarian response to recovery and as they make plans for longer-term risk reduction in disaster affected areas.

56. In addition, a review of the Central Register of Disaster Management Capacities is planned to commence in 2008. The register comprises a series of standby directories to support the United Nations and the international community in delivering humanitarian emergency assistance. The objective of this review is to examine each directory to assess the level of added value and user satisfaction.

C. Strengthening the transition from relief to development

57. The early recovery cluster brings together most major humanitarian, disaster preparedness and development actors, from both within and outside the United Nations system, under one coordinated framework. Given that this is a relatively new area, there was considerable emphasis on early recovery training and capacity-building during the reporting period. Regional early recovery planning and programming workshops were held in Cuba and Thailand, involving the participation of over 75 practitioners from 15 countries. A total of 25 local-level actors from disaster-prone countries in Central America were trained on issues of disaster risk reduction in the framework of local development and local economic recovery. Dedicated sessions on early recovery were included in workshops for humanitarian coordinators and at regional meetings of resident coordinators. Workshops in Geneva for field-based practitioners focused on the concept and practice of early recovery and on bringing cross-cutting issues such as gender and HIV/AIDS into the mainstream.

58. These systems are leading to improved support at the field level. For example, following Cyclone Sidr in November 2007, support was provided to the Government of Bangladesh to compile a national early recovery implementation plan outlining immediate implementation projects in key sectors. The plan integrated recommendations from Government-led damage assessments and a loss and needs assessments by the World Bank which focused on macro-level, longer-term recovery.

59. In addition, a newly established roster of early recovery experts now includes over 100 consultants ready for rapid deployment to early recovery settings. Since its activation in September 2007, approximately 27 specialists have been deployed to support Government-led early recovery efforts.

60. To support this work, a guidance note on early recovery was finalized in April 2008. The note establishes key definitions and guiding principles and provides practical guidance on the various elements of the early recovery process. This will be complemented shortly by a toolkit and assessment tool to further facilitate the practical implementation of early recovery activities on the ground.

61. Guidance was also provided to humanitarian country teams on how to include early recovery needs within existing humanitarian planning tools, such as flash appeals and consolidated appeals. Although important progress has been made with key partners, including many donors, to introduce a degree of flexibility to these appeal processes, it is nevertheless acknowledged that alternate sources of funding for early recovery need to be explored.

IV. Other issues

A. Use of military assets for disaster response

62. The deployment of foreign military assets to both distant and neighbouring countries is a common feature of major international disaster relief operations. While such operations should remain a predominantly civilian function undertaken by humanitarian actors, foreign military assets can play a valuable role in disaster relief operations.

63. To further examine this issue, the United Nations sponsored an independent study to assess the effectiveness of foreign military assets in natural disaster responses. The study, which was completed in March 2008, looked at six interconnected aspects of effectiveness: timeliness, appropriateness, efficiency, absorptive capacity, coordination and costs. Overall, the study reaffirmed the need for Governments to deploy foreign military assets in an effective and principled manner and the importance of existing international guidelines on this issue, in particularly the Guidelines on the Use of Foreign Military and Civil Defence Assets in Disaster Relief (the Oslo Guidelines), which stipulate that the deployment of foreign military assets should respect the core humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality, as well as the sovereignty of States. However, the study identified a considerable lack of awareness and uneven application of the Oslo Guidelines. The study also highlighted continued concern regarding the understanding among Governments and humanitarian actors of the term "last resort" (where military assets should be provided only when efforts to mobilize civilian means have been exhausted). It further showed that the issue of cost-effectiveness is of particular concern to provider Governments, who believe foreign military assets are too costly, and for humanitarian actors, who fear the burden of these costs on humanitarian funding. The Oslo Guidelines stipulate that the cost of deploying military assets should not be borne by affected Governments and should be provided independently of funds earmarked for humanitarian relief assistance.

B. Humanitarian financing for disasters associated with natural hazards

64. In 2007, donors generously provided over $800 million for hazard-related disaster responses, according to the United Nations financial tracking system, which tracks all reported international humanitarian aid provided through the United Nations, the International Organization for Migration, non-governmental organizations, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and bilateral channels, including in-kind aid and private donations. Hazard-related disaster donations constituted approximately 10 per cent of the global humanitarian funding contributions.

65. During the reporting period, the United Nations system and its partner organizations issued 16 flash appeals for hazard-related disasters, the highest number recorded to date. By the end of May 2008, a total of $352 million, or about 54 per cent of the total requested amount of $655 million, had been funded. The Central Emergency Response Fund allocated almost $90 million (or 25.6 per cent) to these flash appeals, making it by far the largest single channel for contributions.

66. The high number of flash appeals also brought several key challenges, such as the need to revise appeals, the need to launch appeals quickly despite the lack of accurate initial data and the subsequent difficulty of integrating preparedness and early recovery into the appeal process. As a result, an overhaul of the flash appeal process was initiated in November 2007 in collaboration with partners in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee and donors. The process reviewed the flash appeal mechanism in the light of other developments in humanitarian policy and response tools, including the Central Emergency Response Fund; the cluster approach; the resident coordinator/humanitarian coordinator function; the need to improve the participation of non-governmental organizations; the balance between

life-saving and early recovery projects; and current efforts to develop contingency planning, rapid needs assessment and surge capacity. The revised mechanism was endorsed by donors at a retreat in Montreux, Switzerland, on the consolidated appeals process and humanitarian finance in February 2008 and by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Sub-Working Group on Consolidated Appeals Process in March 2008. The Inter-Agency Working Group endorsed the paper electronically on 13 June 2008.

67. The review focuses on reasserting the core components of the flash appeal process; namely that they should be very rapid (issued within five to seven days of a sudden-onset disaster or from the declaration of an emergency) and based on available information and inference; that initial allocations from the Central Emergency Response Fund should aim for the same timing in order to support the timely generation of an appeal and provide very rapid funding; that flash appeals should be limited to time-critical needs and include early recovery projects for which there is a need and the implementation capacity is available; and that a process of systematic and regular revision of flash appeals using updated assessment information should be obligatory. The flash appeal for Myanmar was the first to successfully implement most of these concepts.

68. With respect to funding from the Central Emergency Response Fund, the Emergency Relief Coordinator committed $148 million to 28 countries affected by hazard events during the reporting period. On average, it took three working days for funding to be approved from the time a final grant request was submitted by the United Nations humanitarian or resident coordinator in the affected country. In this sense, the Fund has proved itself to be a tool that enables early and timely response, in line with the objectives of the Fund.

69. During the reporting period, 66 per cent of funds from the Central Emergency Response Fund for hazard-related disaster responses were provided for flood and storms, 12 per cent for earthquakes, 13 per cent to cope with the effects of drought, 4 per cent for responses to other severe weather conditions and 5 per cent for disease outbreak control. Almost half of the funding was provided to Asia. The largest recipient of disaster funding from the Fund was Bangladesh, which received a total of $26 million in 2007.

70. The need to channel humanitarian funding to upstream activities such as disaster preparedness, early warning and contingency planning was highlighted in a number of contexts, including at the Montreux retreat on humanitarian financing in February 2008. While preparedness measures will alleviate the cost of response and reduce disaster tolls at the onset of disasters, they have often fallen outside of the humanitarian funding for emergency response. Some measures have been taken to improve the situation, including the launch of the Southern African region preparedness and response plan in February 2008 as a flash appeal. However, further efforts to strengthen financial mechanisms for preparedness are necessary.

71. Similarly, analysis of post-crisis action has repeatedly shown that needs related to early recovery receive less financial assistance than humanitarian and development requirements and that dedicated mechanisms to target early recovery activities have not yet been established. As such, additional work is necessary to ensure an effective transition from relief to development, in particular in post-conflict situations.

V. Recommendations

72. Based on the above, the following recommendations are put forward for consideration by Member States:

(a) Member States are encouraged to underline the importance of early and multi-year commitments to the Central Emergency Response Fund and other humanitarian financing mechanisms, both United Nations and non-United Nations mechanisms, in order to ensure predictable and timely access to resources in response to humanitarian emergencies resulting from natural disasters;

(b) The United Nations system and other humanitarian actors are called upon to improve the dissemination of tools and services to support enhanced disaster risk reduction;

(c) Member States and humanitarian agencies are encouraged to promote national disaster preparedness activities, including contingency planning, at all levels within all relevant sectors, including in particular in the most vulnerable areas and within the framework of the Hyogo Framework for Action;

(d) Member States are encouraged to consider increasing allocation of funds for disaster risk reduction activities and enhancing or developing funding mechanisms to support strengthened preparedness for response and early recovery activities;

(e) Member States and regional organizations are invited to make use of the Guidelines for the Domestic Facilitation and Regulation of International Disaster Relief and Initial Recovery Assistance to strengthen their legal frameworks for international disaster assistance;

(f) Member States are invited to continue their support to the consolidation of United Nations capability in the area of satellite derived geographic information for early warning, preparedness, response and early recovery;

(g) Member States are encouraged to consider the applicability of the Guidelines on the Use of Foreign Military and Civil Defence Assets in Disaster Relief for the coordination of foreign military assets to their national and regional disaster structures, bearing in mind the positive role that neighbouring countries can play in supporting disaster responses;

(h) Member States and humanitarian actors are encouraged to consider the Operational Guidelines on Human Rights and Natural Disasters in the implementation of contingency planning, disaster preparedness and response;

(i) Member States are encouraged to support humanitarian organizations in meeting the increasing humanitarian burden exacerbated by the global challenges of climate change and high food and fuel prices, including by making additional resources available to address innovative approaches being developed to meet those needs.